

PRESS RELEASE

Illinois Board of Elections to Provide Accessible Vote-By-Mail Option for Blind, Deafblind, and Print-Disabled Voters

New system to be available for June primary election

Springfield, Illinois (May 31, 2022): The Illinois State Board of Elections (SBE) announces the launch of a remote accessible vote-by-mail system for the June 2022 primary election. This secure system will allow blind, deafblind, and some other voters with disabilities to vote-by-mail – privately and independently – just as all other Illinois voters can. It allows them to securely receive and mark their ballots electronically at home, instead of forcing them to rely on help from others or travel to vote at polling places, where they could be exposed to COVID-19.

For example, blind and deafblind voters cannot read or mark paper ballots without having a sighted person assist them, which deprives them of an independent, private vote. The new SBE system will allow such voters to use their own screen reader technology, which voices digital content or displays it on a Braille device, to mark their ballots at home. This system will also help voters who, for instance, have manual disabilities that prevent them from marking paper ballots with writing utensils.

Today's SBE launch is the result of a partnership with and advocacy by the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois, an affiliate of the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind Americans, and Equip for Equality, an Illinois nonprofit organization mandated under the Help America Vote Act to promote accessible voting for people with disabilities. Eve Hill of the Baltimore law firm Brown Goldstein & Levy and attorneys at Equip for Equality provided legal representation.

Recently, Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker signed legislation mandating every local election authority to provide its voters with disabilities with an accessible vote-by-mail option starting with the November 2022 general election. This legislation was prompted by two years of advocacy by a group of disability and voting rights advocates led by the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois, Equip for Equality, the Illinois Council of the Blind, Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago, and Reform for Illinois. Today's SBE launch will make it simple and cost-free for Illinois local election authorities to provide access earlier – in time for the June 2022 primary.

"We are thrilled that vote-by-mail is a reality for our blind community," said Marilyn Green, president of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois. "People who are blind, deafblind, or have other print disabilities can vote privately and independently in the June 2022 primary and beyond. We are thankful to all who joined in the effort to bring accessible vote-by-mail to Illinois."

"The COVID-19 pandemic made voting by mail a critical option for all Illinois citizens," said Zena Naiditch, President and CEO of Equip for Equality. "Courts around the country have found that accessible vote-by-mail is required under the Americans with Disabilities Act. These actions by Governor Pritzker and the State Board of Elections will help bring Illinois' system into line with these federal requirements and ensure the civil rights of voters with disabilities."

“Ensuring the right to vote for all Illinois voters is the mission of the State Board of Elections and the 108 local election authorities who conduct the state’s elections,” said Bernadette Matthews, executive director of the Illinois State Board of Elections. “Allowing voters with print disabilities to vote independently is a major step for elections in Illinois.”

The application period to vote-by-mail is already open. Voters interested in voting by mail using this new SBE system must contact their local county clerk or other election authority. Local authority contact information is available on the [SBE website](https://elections.il.gov) (elections.il.gov). The SBE has established an Ombudsperson to help answer questions or facilitate problems encountered by persons with disabilities attempting to vote in the June 2022 Illinois Primary Election. That Ombudsperson is Jordan Andrew, Deputy General Counsel & ADA Coordinator, who can be reached at jandrew@elections.il.gov and phone 217-782-4003.

For more information, contact:

Illinois State Board of Elections – Matt Dietrich, Public Information Officer: mdietrich@elections.il.gov, (217) 558-1955

National Federation of the Blind of Illinois -- Marilyn Green, President: president@nfbfillinois.org, 312-343-8396

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The Illinois State Board of Elections is an independent state agency charged with the responsibility of having general supervision over the administration of election laws of the State of Illinois. Elections are administered locally by the State’s 108 election authorities.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB), headquartered in Baltimore, defends the rights of blind people of all ages and provides information and support to families with blind children, older Americans who are losing vision, and more. Founded in 1940, the NFB is the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind Americans with affiliates, chapters, and divisions in the fifty states, Washington DC, and Puerto Rico. We believe in the hopes and dreams of blind people and work together to transform them into reality. Learn more about our many programs and initiatives at nfb.org

Equip for Equality is a private, not-for-profit entity that advances the human and civil rights of children and adults with disabilities in Illinois. The organization is designated to administer the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy System to safeguard the rights of people with all types of disabilities in Illinois. Congress designated Equip for Equality, as the Illinois Protection and Advocacy System, to promote full participation to people with disabilities in the electoral process. For more information, visit www.equipforequality.org